



Pick Your Path to Health

Domestic Violence

Do you ever have to cry yourself to sleep because your partner, the person you love, makes you suffer? Can you imagine what that would be like? If you do, you're not alone.

Marta Echeverria knows how that feels: For 25 years, she was a victim of domestic abuse by her husband.

"I couldn't sleep," she says. "I would close my eyes and doze off for a second, but then I would jump because I felt as though I was falling off the bed." That's how she spent many nights, unable to sleep, unable to rest after a hard day's work, and unable to control her life.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, each year approximately 1.5 million women are physically assaulted or raped by an intimate partner. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates that about 4 of every 1,000 Latina women are abused by their current or former intimate partner. This number is underestimated, however, because many women do not report abuse.

If you've ever heard a woman describing her husband or partner as, *trabajador, responsable, y casi nunca me pega*, you've heard the voice of a victim of domestic abuse.

The risk to your health

Many women believe they can survive an occasional beating, but that isn't always the case. In 1995, almost 5,000 women in the United States were murdered and about 85 percent of them were killed by someone they knew. Nearly half of the women who knew the perpetrators were murdered by a husband, ex-husband, or boyfriend.

And abuse does not have to kill you to hurt—it can land you in the hospital. More than 500,000 women visit the emergency room for domestic violence injuries every year, and many victims of domestic abuse also suffer emotionally. Domestic abuse also affects children who witness it. In fact, abusive behavior is most common in adults who witnessed abuse or were victims of abuse as children or adolescents.

"It took many years for me to realize that what my husband was doing affected my health," Echeverria says. "At first, I would have headaches, complete boredom, and back pain, which I thought was rheumatism."

For her headaches, she took Tylenol, but when her hands started feeling numb, she knew her health was worse than she thought. She went to the doctor and after a series of tests, he prescribed what she calls, "calmantes for the nerves." She was on the verge of a mental breakdown, but she wouldn't take the medication prescribed by the doctor for fear that her husband would hurt her while she slept, she says.

Putting up with abuse

Like many women, Echeverria believed that this was the kind of life that she had been dealt and she had to *aguantar*—or bear it. She says that her husband witnessed abuse by his own father and severe alcoholism made the situation worse. But, abuse is not a part of life that should be tolerated.

Many women believe that they somehow cause the abuse. This is never the case. The reasons adults become abusive are complex and sometimes are made worse by alcohol or drug abuse. According to the National Latino Alliance for the Elimination of Domestic Violence (known as Alianza), these can range from poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, low education, and many other issues.

Your family

Like Marta Echeverria, your sense of duty and your love for your family may not allow you to consider leaving. But leaving your spouse doesn't have to be the only option.

Assistance programs that rely on protective orders, legal sanctions, and shelters, often interfere with the family interdependence and community connection. Latina women prefer, according to Alianza. But, your family interdependence shouldn't keep you from seeking help.

If you are a victim of abuse, your entire family needs help, including your abusive partner. But you cannot offer that help alone. Your partner needs to make an effort to deal with the issues that are making him or her violent.

Seek Help

Luckily, Echeverria's doctor intervened. He informed her that she would suffer a nervous breakdown so severe it would be difficult to overcome. "If I hadn't finally talked with my doctor about the abuse," she says today, "I wouldn't have understood the damage all the abuse did to my health."

Her doctor referred her to a local organization that offered family counseling services as a first step. He also referred her to an organization that helped her file for a protective order since the beating didn't stop with the counseling.

She says that her decision to eventually leave her husband has renewed her health.

If your life or your children's lives are in danger, act quickly. As much as you hope your partner's behavior will change, it probably won't change unless he or she receives help. Begin by talking with your health care provider. Getting help for you and all the members of your family will keep you safe and can lead you down a path to better health.

Resources

The following are toll-free telephone numbers that offer bilingual and confidential information:

- For helpful information and advice, contact the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) or 1-800-787-3224 (TDD).
- Call 1-866-Su-Familia (1-866-783-2645) for health information and referrals to providers in your community.
- Check the National Women's Health Information Center Web site at <http://www.4woman.gov> or call 1-800-994-WOMAN or for TDD 1-888-220-5446 for advice on where you can call for health information in your State.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health education campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign, please call 1-800-994-WOMAN or 1-888-220-5446 (TDD), or visit the National Women's Health Information Center at <http://www.4woman.gov/> To request weekly health tips by e-mail, click on the box that says, "Click Here for weekly health tips by e-mail."

